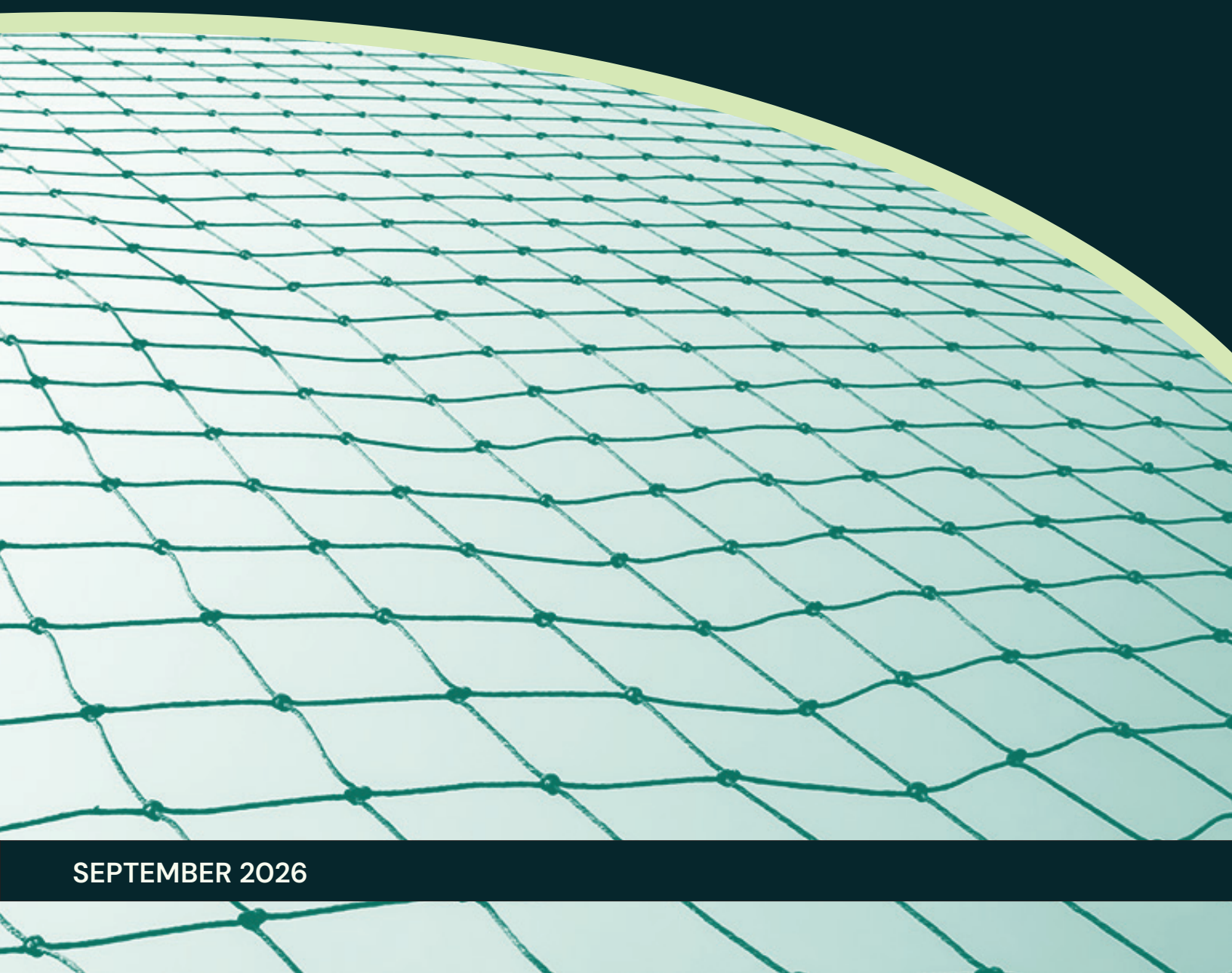


Progress and stagnation: US poverty, deep poverty, and the safety net, 1967–2023

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SEPTEMBER 2026

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Progress and stagnation: US poverty, deep poverty, and the safety net, 1967–2023

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Abstract

This paper explores changes in U.S. poverty since the late 1960s and the role that changes in safety net programs played in these developments. We examine changes in the poverty rate, poverty gap, deep poverty rate, and deep poverty gap from 1967 to 2023, using both the “historical/standard” and “anchored” Supplemental Poverty Measures.

The paper finds that the poverty rate and poverty gap declined markedly over this period, with the poverty gap declining somewhat less than the poverty rate. The paper finds considerably less progress, however, in reducing deep poverty and especially the deep poverty gap, which shows little improvement over this period. The paper also finds that these poverty changes have not been evenly distributed, with the most concerning results being for people aged 18–64 who have little or no earnings and do not live with children.

The paper finds that these trends reflect both the overall strengthening of the safety net over this period, especially for the elderly and low-income working families with children, and the weakening of parts of the safety net—especially cash assistance programs—for many very poor people who have little or no earnings and are not elderly or classified as disabled. The findings also reflect the failure of the economic growth that occurred over this period to generate much poverty reduction.

Because our analysis ends in 2023, it does not reflect the deep cuts to safety net programs enacted in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) of 2025. When fully in effect, those cuts almost certainly will increase poverty and deep poverty rates and gaps and will thus reverse some of the gains reported here.

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Introduction

How has the level of poverty in the United States changed since the late 1960s, and what role have changes in social programs played in those developments? A 2025 Hamilton Project paper, “Changes in the safety net over recent decades and their impact” (Greenstein 2025), explores this question with respect to poverty rates and finds, as many other studies have, that poverty rates declined substantially over this period due primarily to the expansion of safety net programs (Wimer et al. 2016; Fox et al. 2015b; Wimer et al. 2025; Kearney and Sullivan 2025; Bahk et al. 2024).

This analysis builds on that paper, principally by also looking at changes in deep poverty—that is, when poverty is measured using a threshold of 50 percent of the poverty line—and in the poverty gap from 1967 to 2023.

Poverty rates measure what share of the population lives below the poverty line (or, in the case of deep poverty rates, below 50 percent of the poverty line) but not how far below the line people who are poor fall. Poverty gap measures, by contrast, capture not only whether people are poor but also how far below the poverty line they are. If people who are already relatively close to the poverty line are raised above it by the economy or changes in government policies, but people who are much poorer are pushed deeper into poverty by economic or policy changes, then poverty rates can fall without commensurate improvement in the poverty gap, and the deep poverty rate can come down less than the overall poverty rate.

We find that over the 1967–2023 period that is the focus of this paper, both the poverty rate and the poverty gap declined markedly using the 100-percent-of-poverty threshold, with poverty gaps declining somewhat less than poverty rates. As figure 1 shows, the poverty rate declined by about one-quarter to one-half (depending on what poverty measure one uses, as we discuss below), with the poverty gap falling by modestly less than that.

Our analyses also show that these poverty declines are primarily the result of expansions of social programs over these years rather than growth in the economy. The poverty rate and poverty gap, as measured before government benefits and taxes are taken into account, declined modestly or even

increased over the 1967–2023 period. It is only after government benefits and taxes are counted that poverty is seen to have declined markedly. (See figure 1.)

There has been less progress, however, in reducing deep poverty and especially in reducing the deep poverty gap, which does not show much improvement over this period. Our most concerning results are for people aged 18 to 64 who do not live with children.

These findings reflect both the overall strengthening of the U.S. safety net that occurred over this period—particularly for low-income working families with children and people 65 and over—and the failure of the economic growth that occurred over this period to generate substantial poverty reduction. The findings also reflect the weakening of the safety net for many very poor households who have little or no earnings and are not elderly or disabled. Since the late 1980s, substantial cuts have been made in cash assistance programs for such households.¹

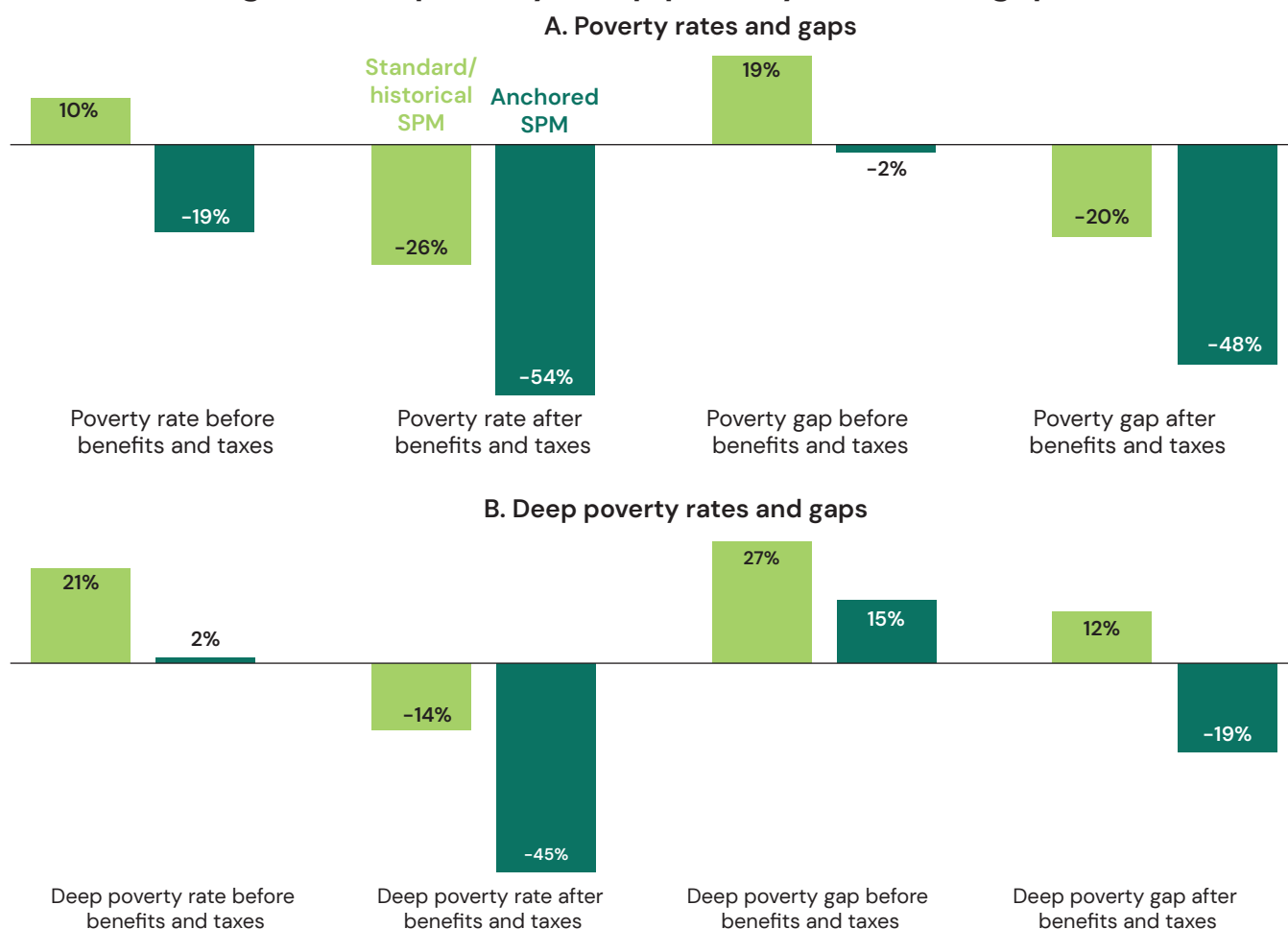
This paper relies on a series of data analyses that cover the years from 1967 to 2023, which can be found in the supplemental Excel tables published alongside this paper. The years 1967 and 2023 represent appropriate comparison years, with very similar unemployment rates in both years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], n.d.).²

These analyses were conducted using data from the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), as well as historical Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) data produced by Columbia University’s Center on Poverty and Social Policy.³ We created an anchored SPM series using the 2023 SPM thresholds, as adjusted for inflation, using the U.S. Department of Labor’s retroactive CPI research series (R-CPI-U-RS). Our analyses rest on more than a decade of pioneering work in this area by Christopher Wimer and others at the Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy, who first established SPM data series that extend back to the 1960s and have produced an array of papers on SPM poverty trends since then (Fox et al. 2015a; Fox et al. 2015b; Wimer et al. 2016; Wimer et al. 2025; Vinh et al. 2025).

In addition to its findings regarding poverty trends, this paper discusses several issues related

FIGURE 1

Percent change in SPM poverty, deep poverty rates, and gaps, 1967–2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors' analysis.

Note: Calculations use 2023 data that are adjusted for the change Census made in 2017 in its processing system for the CPS ASEC.

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to poverty measurement, including the advantages of using both the historical SPM and the anchored SPM to track changes in poverty over time. As explained below, this analysis uses both of these SPM measures to provide what we regard as upper and lower bounds for changes in SPM-measured poverty over time.

The paper opens with a discussion of these poverty-measurement issues and then provides data on changes in poverty rates and the poverty gap over the 1967–2023 period, using both of the SPMs and employing both 100-percent-of-poverty-line and 50-percent-of-poverty-line thresholds to measure changes in both in poverty and deep poverty. The paper then turns to a discussion of the role of safety net changes in affecting these results. Safety net expansions have played the predominant role in generating the large declines we see in the poverty rate and poverty gap, but sharp cuts in basic cash assistance for people who aren't elderly or

disabled and have little or no earnings have been a factor in the relative lack of progress on deep poverty for certain population groups.

Our analysis ends in 2023 and thus before the enactment and implementation of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) of 2025, a measure that makes the deepest cuts in programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), Medicaid, and health coverage provided through the Affordable Care Act marketplaces in those programs' histories. The bill also includes stiff cuts in the eligibility of various groups of legally present immigrants for certain benefits. Many of these reductions have not yet been fully implemented. When the rollbacks are fully in effect, they almost certainly will increase poverty and deep poverty rates and gaps, as well as the number of people who lack health coverage, and will thus reverse some of the gains reported here (CBO 2025b; CBO 2025c).

I. Issues in measuring changes in poverty over time

Analyses of poverty levels and changes in poverty over time typically rely primarily on the poverty rate—the share of people whose income places them below the poverty line. Data on the poverty gap, however, are useful as well. They measure not only whether people are above or below the poverty line but also, for those below the line, how far below it they fall.

We measure the poverty gap by using the Poverty Gap Index (PGI).⁴ This metric measures the depth of financial hardship by looking at exactly how far below the poverty line an individual falls and expressing that shortfall as a proportion of the poverty line. The PGI averages the income shortfall across the entire population (counting the non-poor as having a zero shortfall).⁵ In practical terms, a PGI of 10 percent means that lifting everyone out of poverty would require a perfectly targeted financial transfer equal to 10 percent of each person's respective poverty line. The World Bank and the United Nations feature the PGI as one of their key metrics of poverty measurement (Haughton and Khandker 2009; U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Other researchers have used it as well (Foster et al. 2010; Parolin et al. 2023). While a per-capita poverty gap measure has advantages over the PGI in assessing the depth of poverty in a given year, the PGI has strong advantages over a per-capita poverty gap measure for tracking changes in poverty gaps over time. As appendix 1 explains, this is primarily because the PGI does a better job of taking into account changes in family size over time and is not affected by decisions regarding how the nominal dollar gap should be adjusted for inflation.

Which poverty measure to use?

Another poverty-measurement issue is which poverty measure to use to assess the level of poverty and how that has changed over time. Like most analysts, we reject the so-called “Official Poverty Measure” (OPM) due to its numerous deficiencies, including that it fails to count income from social programs like SNAP and housing assistance that do

not provide their benefits in cash or that provide their benefits through the tax code, as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) do. As most other researchers have done in recent years, we rely on the SPM, which was developed in response to the OPM's shortcomings and has increasingly replaced the OPM in analysis and public discourse about poverty levels and trends.

There are two SPM measures, however. That raises the question of which of the two SPMs to use to measure changes in poverty over time—what is known as the “standard” or the “historical” SPM or what is known as the “anchored” SPM. The poverty thresholds in the “standard/historical” SPM are adjusted not only to rise over time with inflation but also to reflect changes in societal patterns of expenditures on basic needs.⁶ The “anchored” SPM, by contrast, takes poverty thresholds for a single year and adjusts them for inflation for years before or after that year.

As we explain below and in the appendix to this paper, both SPMs have strengths and weaknesses, with the anchored SPM overstating progress on poverty over time and the standard/historical SPM understating it. We regard the two SPM time series as essentially providing upper and lower bounds on progress on poverty, and we present data in this paper under both SPMs rather than just one.

The anchored SPM

The goal of an anchored poverty measure is to hold living standards as constant as possible across time and thereby ensure that any trends shown in the poverty data are due purely to changes in the inflation-adjusted value of families' annual resources and not to changes that have occurred in the standard of living or other factors (Wimer et al. 2016). In this analysis, we use SPM thresholds anchored to 2023.⁷ In essence, our anchored SPM series is asking, “What would poverty rates have been in the past when considered against 2023's living standards?”

Living standards in the U.S. have improved over the last five decades, so it is not surprising that

when one calculates the SPM poverty rate for 1967 using 2023 living standards, one finds a considerably higher poverty rate (29.8 percent) for that year than when one uses poverty thresholds based on 1967 expenditure levels, as the historical SPM series does (which produces a poverty rate of 18.5 percent for 1967). (While the choice of the year to which to anchor the anchored SPM's poverty thresholds affects the level of poverty that the anchored SPM shows for any year, major trends in poverty under the anchored SPM generally will be similar regardless of the anchor year chosen.)

A significant weakness of the anchored SPM series is that there are reasons to believe the cost of living for low-income families has been increasing faster over recent decades than the overall inflation rate. Anchored SPM thresholds are adjusted using the CPI-U-RS, which measures the overall rate of inflation for all urban consumers. Labor Department data (Klick and Stockburger 2024) show that the rate of inflation for the bottom quintile of the U.S. population has been higher over recent decades than the overall rate of inflation. Other studies also have found that inflation has been greater in recent decades for low-income households than for households higher on the income scale (Jaravel 2021; Wimer et al. 2019).

This discrepancy appears to have occurred in part because housing costs have risen faster than the overall CPI-U-RS, especially for low-income households, and housing costs constitute a larger share of poor households' budgets than of the budgets of people higher on the income scale (Whitney 2024).⁸ The anchored SPM poverty thresholds may not have fully kept pace with low-income households' living costs for other reasons as well, as the appendix explains. And because the anchored SPM's poverty-line thresholds have risen more slowly than low-income households' living costs, using the anchored SPM series likely overstates progress on poverty over time.

The standard/historical SPM

While the anchored SPM poverty thresholds appear to understate increases over time in the living costs that low-income households face—and thus cause the anchored SPM to overstate reductions in poverty in recent decades—using the historical SPM (as we refer to that measure from here on) to measure poverty trends raises issues of its own. The historical SPM poverty thresholds are designed to incorporate increases over time both in low-income households' living costs and in their living standards. These thresholds do not differentiate between increases that reflect higher basic living

costs and increases that reflect improvements in households' living conditions.

Here, too, housing provides an example. Over the years, low-income households have experienced substantial improvements in housing conditions, which have played a role in raising their housing costs. Part of the large increases in housing costs reflected in the historical SPM's poverty thresholds stems from these improvements. A recent study of changes in housing conditions since 1980 finds, for example, that low-income households are four times more likely now than they were in 1980 to have central air conditioning, are considerably more likely both to live in larger housing units and to have various time-saving appliances such as dishwashers and clothes dryers, and are far less likely to live in units with adverse conditions like water leaks (Kearney and Sullivan 2025).

The historical SPM's poverty thresholds rise not only with increases in the prices of a core basket of necessities, but also with increases in living standards such as these and their attendant costs. The historical SPM's poverty-line thresholds tend to rise faster than the cost of living that low-income households face for a number of other reasons as well, as appendix 1 explains.

For such reasons, various researchers including Christopher Wimer and colleagues (Wimer et al. 2016), analysts at the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA 2014), and analysts at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Chaudry et al. 2016) have observed that although both SPMs have value, the anchored SPM may provide a cleaner and better accounting of the particular roles that changes in social programs, the labor market, and other factors have had on poverty over time. Similarly, in its 2019 book-length examination of child poverty issues, a committee convened by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) used the anchored SPM to track changes in poverty over time because of its advantages in measuring the poverty effects of changes in government programs, the labor market, and family structure (NASEM 2019).

In short, the anchored SPM appears to overstate progress on poverty because its poverty thresholds do not fully keep pace with increases in low-income households' actual living costs, while the historical SPM appears to understate progress on poverty because—due to its nature as a quasi-relative poverty measure that reflects increases in living standards—its poverty thresholds tend to rise faster over time than low-income households' basic living costs do. (Measures of poverty that use the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) index to adjust poverty thresholds over time, rather than the R-CPI-U-RS, appear to overstate progress on

poverty to a still-greater degree than the anchored SPM because the PCE more heavily understates the level of inflation that low-income households experience; see appendix I.)

Accordingly, this paper provides poverty rate and poverty gap data over time under *both* SPMs. We essentially treat the two SPMs as providing upper and lower bounds for changes in poverty over time. While we concur that the anchored measure has advantages for assessing the impact that changes in social programs have had on poverty over time, both SPMs have strengths and weaknesses.

We regard it as important for the Census Bureau and BLS to provide poverty thresholds that keep up with changing societal standards and to publish a poverty measure annually that uses those thresholds. In addition, we think that purely relative poverty measures, such as ones that measure what share of a nation's population has income below the nation's median income level, can provide valuable information as well, as they track whether low-income households are gaining ground or falling further behind relative to the median household.

Underreporting of benefits

Another poverty-measurement issue is that Census data miss some of the income that households receive from government benefit programs, due to the underreporting of various benefits in these data (Meyer and Mittag 2019; NASEM 2026). To address this problem, many researchers have relied on the Urban Institute's microsimulation Transfer Income

Model, version 3 (TRIM3).⁹ TRIM3 begins with annual survey data from the Census Bureau (the CPS ASEC). By applying detailed program rules, it identifies households eligible for assistance, simulates additional participants (beyond those shown in the Census data), and adjusts the dollar value of benefits until those data match government administrative records on the actual number of recipients, their key demographic characteristics, and the total amount of benefits distributed.

TRIM3 data are publicly available, however, only for years from 1993 to 2023, precluding their use for measuring changes in poverty that extend beyond that period. For this reason, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's child poverty study did not use TRIM3 adjustments when it examined poverty changes since 1967 (NASEM 2019). We follow the same course here. We employ TRIM3 adjustments in those parts of the paper where we analyze poverty changes over more recent periods (i.e., periods that start in or after 1993).¹⁰

Were TRIM adjustments available back to the 1960s, they would show somewhat lower poverty rates and smaller poverty gaps for all years. TRIM3 adjustments exert a larger effect on point-in-time poverty *levels* (particularly deep poverty levels) than on long-term poverty *trends*. But because the underreporting of government benefits in the Census data has somewhat increased over time (NASEM 2026), the lack of TRIM adjustments in our 1967–2023 comparisons means those comparisons somewhat understate progress on poverty reduction.

II. The results, part 1: Changes in poverty rates and the poverty gap since 1967

This section of the paper presents results from our analysis of data on poverty rates and poverty gaps from 1967 to 2023, both before and after accounting for government taxes and transfers and under both the anchored SPM and the historical SPM. The analysis includes poverty rates and gaps as measured under both 100-percent-of-poverty thresholds and 50-percent-of-poverty thresholds; we show changes over time both in overall poverty rates and gaps and in deep poverty rates and gaps. These data can be found in the supplemental excel tables published alongside this paper.

Under the *anchored* SPM, the poverty rate after taking taxes and government benefits into account stood at 29.8 percent in 1967 and 12.8 percent in 2023. The anchored SPM poverty rate thus decreased by 57 percent, or more than half, over this period. Using the *historical* SPM, the poverty rate after taxes and transfers fell from 18.5 percent in 1967 to 12.8 percent in 2023, a decline of 31 percent. (See table 1.) The data thus show notable reductions in the poverty rate under both measures. The decline is larger under the anchored SPM because this measure evaluates 1967 incomes against 2023 living standards in order to keep living standards constant over the entire comparison period. This yields a considerably higher baseline poverty threshold for 1967 than the historical SPM, which calculates its 1967 threshold based on actual 1967 expenditure levels.

An additional factor should be noted here. To improve data quality, the Census Bureau instituted in 2017 a new data-processing and imputation system for the CPS ASEC that counts more retirement income and imputes more income for people who don't know their exact income but can estimate it in a range. As our Excel appendix tables show, the Census Bureau released poverty data for 2017 under both the old and the new systems, with the new system showing an SPM poverty rate for that year 0.9 percentage points lower than the rate using the old processing system. For years since then, Census has issued poverty data only under the new system. If we add 0.9 percentage points to the poverty

rate data for 2023 to adjust for this methodology change, the anchored SPM poverty rate after government taxes and benefits declined by 54 percent over the 1967–2023 period rather than 57 percent, while the historical SPM poverty rate declined by 26 percent rather than 31 percent. (See table 1.) The remaining data we present in this paper on changes in poverty rates between earlier years and 2023 reflect these upward adjustments in the poverty rates for 2023, in order to account for these changes in the Census methodology.

As noted, the poverty data we cite in our comparisons of 1967 and 2023 do not include TRIM adjustments for the underreporting of government benefits in the Census data, because TRIM data are available only back to 1993. The TRIM data that are publicly available for years from 1993 onward, which include adjustments for the underreporting of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), SNAP, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, indicate that overall poverty declined by only a modest amount more over this period when TRIM adjustments are made.¹¹ A comparison of TRIM-adjusted data for 1993 to TRIM-adjusted data for 2017, using the anchored SPM, shows that the overall poverty rate after taxes and transfers declined by 28 percent over this period without TRIM adjustments and by 32 percent with the adjustments. The poverty gap after taxes and transfers as measured by the PGI fell 25 percent without TRIM adjustments and 30 percent with them. (We use TRIM data here for 2017 rather than TRIM data for a later year because TRIM data for years after 2017 reflect the effects of the changes that Census made then to its processing system for the CPS ASEC.) Thus, if one could adjust the data for the underreporting of AFDC/TANF, SNAP, and SSI benefits over the entire 1967–2023 period, that likely would show only modest additional progress in reducing overall poverty compared to what the non-TRIM-adjusted data indicate. TRIM adjustments matter more for child poverty trends, however, and for trends for certain populations such as single mothers. Correcting for

TABLE 1

SPM poverty rates, 1967 and 2023

	Anchored SPM	Historical SPM
1967	29.8%	18.5%
2023	12.8%	12.8%
2023 adjusted*	13.7%	13.7%
Percent change, 1967–2023	–57%	–31%
Percent change, 1967–2023 adjusted*	–54%	–26%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors’ analysis.

Note: The 2023 data that are starred are adjusted for the change in Census’ processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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TABLE 2

Poverty Gap Index, 1967 and 2023

	Anchored SPM	Historical SPM
1967	11.1%	7.2%
2023	5.2%	5.2%
2023 adjusted*	5.8%	5.8%
Percent change, 1967–2023	–53%	–28%
Percent change, 1967–2023 adjusted*	–48%	–20%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors’ analysis.

Note: The 2023 data that are starred are adjusted for the change in Census’ processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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underreporting is also important when measuring deep poverty, because underreported benefits make up a larger share of the total income of those with the lowest reported incomes, as we discuss later (Trisi and Saenz 2020).

Changes in the poverty gap

The PGI data in our dataset show that the poverty gap, too, declined over the 1967–2023 period, though by modestly less than the poverty rate fell. Under the anchored SPM, the PGI declined 53 percent over this period. Using the historical SPM, it declined 28 percent. (See table 2.)

Adjusting for the changes that Census made in its processing system in 2017 slightly lowers the size of the poverty-gap decline. The PGI was 0.5 to 0.6 percentage points lower in 2017 under the new processing system than under the prior system. If we add 0.5 to 0.6 points to the PGI for 2023, the PGI is seen to have dropped by 48 percent over the 1967–2023 period under the anchored SPM (rather than 53 percent) and by 20 percent under the historical SPM (rather than 28 percent; see table 2.) As with the data for poverty rates, the poverty-gap data for

2023 that this paper presents in the pages that follow reflect this adjustment for the 2017 change in Census’ methodology.

As discussed above, the anchored SPM likely overstates progress on poverty over time while the historical SPM likely understates it, and this suggests using both SPMs and regarding them as upper and lower bounds. Viewed this way, the poverty rate declined over the 1967–2023 period by between about one-fourth and modestly more than half, while the poverty gap (as measured by the PGI) declined by between about one-fifth and one-half, with the declines likely being somewhat larger if adjustments for the underreporting of benefits could be made for all of these years.

The role of social programs

What accounts for these poverty declines? We find, as an array of papers from Wimer and his colleagues and various other researchers have, that expansions of government safety-net programs are the predominant reason for this progress (Fox et al. 2015a; Fox et al. 2015b; Wimer et al. 2016; Wimer et al. 2025; Bahk et al. 2024; Greenstein 2025). This can be seen

TABLE 3

Effect of government benefits and taxes on poverty rates, 1967 and 2023

	SPM poverty rate before benefits and taxes	SPM poverty rates after benefits and taxes	Percent change due to benefits and taxes
Under anchored SPM			
1967	29.4%	29.8%	+1%
2023*	23.8%	13.7%	–42%
Under historical SPM			
1967	21.8%	18.5%	–15%
2023*	24.0%	13.7%	–43%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors' analysis.

Note: 2023 data reflect adjustments for the change in Census' processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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TABLE 4

Effect of government benefits and taxes on poverty gaps, 1967 and 2023

	PGI before benefits and taxes	PGI after benefits and taxes	Percent change in PGI due to benefits and taxes
Under anchored SPM			
1967	16.3%	11.1%	–32%
2023*	16.0%	5.8%	–64%
Under historical SPM			
1967	13.4%	7.2%	–46%
2023*	16.0%	5.8%	–64%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors' analysis.

Note: 2023 data reflect adjustments for the change in Census' processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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by comparing data on the poverty rate and poverty gap before government taxes and benefits are considered to data on the poverty rate and poverty gap after government taxes and transfers are taken into account.

Under the anchored SPM, both the poverty rate and the poverty gap *before* counting government benefits and taxes declined only modestly between 1967 and 2023, and by far less than the poverty rate and the poverty gap decreased *after* taxes and benefits are taken into account. Under the historical SPM, the poverty rate and the poverty gap before government benefits and taxes are counted actually were slightly higher in 2023 than in 1967, while the poverty rate and poverty gap *after* counting taxes and transfers were markedly lower in 2023 than in 1967. (See tables 3 and 4.) These data indicate that the strengthening of government programs, rather than the economy, accounted for most of the improvement in poverty. The programs whose expansion and growth have had the largest poverty-reduction

impacts are SNAP and the refundable tax credits, particularly the EITC, as well as Social Security for the elderly population (Fox et al. 2015b).

Other data from our analysis reinforce this point. Under the historical SPM, taxes and transfers reduced the poverty rate by only about 15 percent in 1967, while under the anchored SPM, taxes and transfers *increased* the poverty rate slightly in 1967 (by 1 percent) because taxes pushed more people into poverty in 1967 than social programs lifted out. In contrast, in 2023, taxes and transfers reduced the poverty rate by more than 40 percent under both SPMs. (See table 3.) Similarly, while taxes and transfers reduced the size of the poverty gap by 32 to 46 percent in 1967, (depending on which SPM one uses), they reduced the poverty gap by 64 percent in 2023 (under both SPMs; see table 4).

These drops in poverty reflect substantial expansions of various social programs over these years, particularly Social Security and a number of low-income, or targeted, programs. Federal

expenditures for Social Security and Medicare increased from 2.8 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1967 to 8.0 percent in 2023. Expenditures for targeted programs climbed from 1.4 percent of GDP in 1967 to 5.0 in 2023, with the bulk of the increase coming in health-coverage programs, primarily Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and subsidies to help people purchase coverage in the Affordable Care Act marketplaces. Indeed, expenditures for targeted health programs increased from 0.2 percent to 2.9 percent of GDP over the 1967–2023 period. Expenditures for targeted programs outside health care, including expenditures for services programs as well as benefits programs, also rose, but considerably less rapidly: from 1.2 percent of GDP in 1967 to 2.2 percent in 2023, with most of that increase occurring between 1967 and the late 1970s¹² (Kogan 2022; CBO 2025a; OMB 2025).

Nevertheless, the news with respect to safety-net changes is not all positive from a poverty-reduction standpoint. The benefits from safety net expansions were not evenly distributed across the low-income population. The safety net strengthened materially for low- and moderate-income working families with children and for people 65 and over (Greenstein 2025). But support in areas other than health coverage strengthened much less, if at all, for certain other low-income groups, particularly people who have little or no earnings, are not elderly or classified as disabled, and are not raising children at home. This is reflected in data on changes in deep poverty rates and the deep poverty gap, which we examine in section III of this paper.

The limited role of the economy

Another striking finding that emerges from these data is the very limited role the economic growth of this period (1967–2023) played in reducing poverty. As Wimer et al. (2026) recently noted, and as our data also show, the poverty rate before government taxes and transfers declined little over this period despite the considerable economic growth that occurred. That rate remained above 20 percent in every year between 1967 and 2023 under both SPMs.

To be sure, the increase over this period in the share of the U.S. population that is elderly played a role here, as elderly people are more likely than others to be below the poverty line before public benefits (including Social Security) are taken into account. But the lack of progress on pre-tax-and-transfer poverty, or what one might call “market poverty,” still is striking, especially since real per-capita GDP rose by 173 percent over the 1967–2023 period (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis [BEA] 1967–2023).

These data and findings are consistent with those reported nearly two decades ago by noted poverty scholar Sheldon Danziger in an important 2007 article (Danziger 2007). Danziger found that the relationship between economic growth and poverty changed dramatically after about 1973, with the poverty-reducing effects of per-capita economic growth diminishing markedly. From the years after World War II to the early 1970s, Danziger reported, poverty fell substantially, in tandem with economic growth that increased real wages and improved living conditions. But that changed sharply after the early 1970s, he found, with workers who lack more than a high-school education (especially male workers) being hit hard and experiencing decreases in real earnings despite the economy’s expansion. Danziger pointed to “the poverty-increasing effects of a labor market that shifted from a quarter century of rapid economic growth in which a rising tide lifted all boats” to a prolonged period of slower economic growth and rising inequality (Danziger 2007, 4). He added, “The relationship between GDP and poverty changed after 1973 because the era of steadily rising real wages for workers across the distribution had ended” (Danziger 2007, 5).

Danziger’s data went through 2004, but more recent data continue to show a large disconnect since the early 1970s between economic growth and how those on the lower rungs of the income scale fared before government benefits are counted (Sherman et al. 2024). From 1973 to 2023, real per-capita GDP grew by 134 percent (BEA 1967–2023), while real median family income rose 45 percent and real median household income increased by 33 percent (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis [FRED] 1967–2023; Guzman and Kollar 2024).¹³

Moreover, these median income data show trends for those in the middle of the income distribution. Those on the bottom rungs of the distribution have fared worse (Goodman-Bacon and Liu 2026; Sherman et al. 2024; Vinh et al. 2025; Danziger 2007). Mishel et al. (2015) found that the real hourly wages of low-wage workers, which they defined as those at the 10th percentile of the wage distribution, declined by 5 percent between 1979 and 2013. (2013 was the last year they examined.) Danziger concluded that developments of this nature reflected “a failure of the economy, not a failure of antipoverty policies” (Danziger 2007, 6).

Changes in family structure and labor force participation also played a role in the failure of poverty to decline more. Danziger noted that “poverty would be somewhat lower today if fewer low-skilled men had withdrawn from the labor market and if marriage rates had not declined.” But, he added, “these effects are small compared to the poverty-increasing effects of a labor market that shifted from a quarter

century of rapid economic growth” in which the gains from such growth were broadly distributed to a prolonged period of slower economic growth with much greater inequality in how the economic gains were spread (Danziger 2007, 4). He also noted that part of the decline in labor supply among less-educated men was a result of the decline in the real wages less-educated workers receive. (In addition, the increase in the share of married-couple families in which both spouses are employed has pushed in the opposite direction.)

An examination of the causes for the divergence since the early 1970s between economic growth

and market-poverty reduction is beyond the scope of this paper. Factors that have contributed to the erosion of real wages for less-educated workers and to increased earnings inequality appear to include advances in technology, declines in industrial manufacturing, and globalization, accompanied by a decline in labor’s share of GDP growth, with larger shares of that growth accruing to capital income and to corporations while labor unions grew weaker and the federal minimum wage eroded (Danziger 2007; Mishel et al. 2015; Karabarbounis 2024).

III. The results, part 2: Changes in deep poverty

In any year, the deep poverty rate and deep poverty gap will be considerably lower than the full poverty rate and full poverty gap. A considerably smaller share of the U.S. population lives below 50 percent of the poverty line than below 100 percent.

Our analysis of the data suggests that progress in reducing the deep poverty rate since the late 1960s has been more modest than progress in reducing the overall poverty rate, though the deep poverty data come with qualifications. The underreporting of benefit income appears to matter more for the deep poverty rate than overall poverty rate (Meyer and Mittag 2019; NASEM 2026). Pushing in the other direction, Brady and Parolin caution that the deep poverty data miss many of those who are homeless (Brady and Parolin 2020).

Our data indicate that the deep poverty rate, like the overall poverty rate, has declined since 1967 (see Table 5), falling by more than two-fifths under the anchored SPM (from 8.9 percent in 1967 to 4.9 percent in 2023) and by about one-seventh under the historical SPM (from 5.7 percent in 1967 to 4.9 percent in 2023). On the other hand, the deep poverty rate is essentially unchanged since 1968, as distinguished from 1967, under the historical SPM and since the early 1970s using an anchored SPM, findings earlier reported by Liana Fox, Christopher Wimer, and colleagues (Fox et al. 2015a; Wimer et al. 2016).

Moreover, our data on the deep poverty gap, which likely understate the decline in the gap modestly though not dramatically,¹⁴ suggest little improvement in this measure. Over the 1967–2023 period, the deep poverty gap declined by 0.7 percentage points under the anchored SPM, a decline of 19 percent, while climbing by 0.3 percentage points under the historical SPM, an increase of 12 percent. (See table 6.) These changes are small in percentage-point terms, and they suggest little meaningful progress in reducing the deep poverty gap over the 1967–2023 period. This could indicate that while some people escaped deep poverty, those living in deep poverty today may be as poor or poorer on average than those who lived in deep poverty more than half a century ago. These deep

poverty data need to be treated with some caution, however, as the data appear to miss a considerable number of those who are homeless and because of the underreporting of benefits and other sources of income. Improving the quality of the deep poverty data is an area that warrants further research.

The data paint a particularly concerning picture regarding deep poverty trends for people aged 18 to 64 who are not living with children. (Later in the paper, we also discuss some deep poverty trends and issues among single mother families with children.) These data show little progress on the deep poverty rate for this group; its deep poverty rate declined by 17 percent over the 1967–2023 period under the anchored SPM but rose by 17 percent under the historical SPM. And the data show that under both SPMs, deep poverty has worsened for this group since the late 1980s.

Several factors appear to be at work here. The group's deep pre-tax-and-transfer rate stood at about 11.5 percent in 2023, higher than in 1989, when it was in the 8 to 9 percent range, and slightly higher than it was in 1967 when it was in the 9 to 11 percent range, depending on which SPM one uses. The erosion of job opportunities for people with limited levels of skills or education and the erosion of wages for those on the lower rungs of the wage scale have likely played roles here (Wimer et al. 2020).

In addition, between 1989 and 2023, during the same period that this group's deep poverty rate before government benefits was edging up, the safety net for this group was contracting, with substantial cuts in both state cash assistance and SNAP for this population, as discussed below. As a result of these factors, the deep poverty rate *after* government benefits are counted for people aged 18 to 64 who are not living with children climbed from 4.3 percent to 5.8 percent between 1989 and 2023 under the anchored SPM and from 3.4 percent to 5.8 percent under the historical SPM. (See table 7.)

These trends do not change much if TRIM adjustments are included. Without TRIM adjustments, the deep poverty rate for this group after taxes and transfers increased by 17 to 31 percent between

TABLE 5
SPM deep poverty rates, 1967 and 2023

	Anchored SPM	Historical SPM
1967	8.9%	5.7%
2023*	4.9%	4.9%
Percent change, 1967–2023*	–45%	–14%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors’ analysis.
 Note: 2023 data reflect adjustments for the change in Census’ processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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TABLE 6
Deep poverty PGIs, 1967 and 2023

	Anchored SPM	Historical SPM
1967	3.9%	2.8%
2023*	3.2%	3.1%
Percent change, 1967–2023*	–19%	+12%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors’ analysis.
 Note: 2023 data reflect adjustments for the change in Census’ processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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TABLE 7
SPM deep poverty rates for people aged 18–64 who are not living with children

	Anchored SPM	Historical SPM
1967	7.0%	5.0%
1989	4.3%	3.4%
2023*	5.8%	5.8%
Percent change, 1967–2023*	–17%	+17%
Percent change, 1989–2023*	+35%	+71%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors’ analysis.
 Note: 2023 data reflect adjustments for the change in Census’ processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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1993 and 2017, depending on which SPM one uses. With TRIM adjustments, the rate rose by 16 to 29 percent. (As noted earlier, TRIM data are not available for years before 1993, and the TRIM data for years after 2017 reflect changes that Census instituted in its processing system.) These data and findings are broadly consistent with those Brady and Parolin reported (Brady and Parolin 2020). They found an increase in deep poverty from the mid-1990s to 2016 that was concentrated among those not living with children.

If one looks at average deep poverty rates by decade for people aged 18 to 64 who are not living with children, a pattern emerges. The deep poverty rate for this group averaged 3.6 percent in the 1980s under the historical SPM and 4.7 percent under the anchored SPM. It has been above those levels every decade since. The deep poverty rate for this group averaged 5.2 to 5.8 percent in the 2000–09 decade and 6.2 to 6.7 percent in the 2010–19 decade, depending on which SPM one uses. It stood at 5.8 percent under both SPM measures in 2023. (See table 8.)

TABLE 8

Average deep poverty rates by decade for people aged 18–64 who are not living with children

	Anchored SPM	Historical SPM
1970s	4.6%	3.4%
1980s	4.7%	3.6%
1990s	5.1%	4.2%
2000s	5.8%	5.2%
2010s*	6.7%	6.2%
2023*	5.8%	5.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors’ analysis.

Note: These data include adjustments for years since 2017 for the changes in Census’ processing system for the CPS ASEC.



The data on changes in the deep poverty *gap* for this population raise concern as well. Between 1967 and 2023, the deep poverty gap for people aged 18 to 64 who are not living with children grew larger under both SPMs—by 13 percent under the anchored SPM and 44 percent under the historical

SPM. These poverty gap data need to be treated with some caution, however, as they represent increases in the deep poverty gap of 0.5 and 1.2 percentage points, respectively, and because of benefit underreporting.

IV. Trends by race and ethnicity

While the overall poverty rate has declined for virtually all groups, progress in reducing poverty has been strongest for Black and Latino people. But large disparities in poverty among Black, Latino and white people persist for a number of reasons, including past and present discrimination and other inequities in both private-sector and public-sector policies, although these disparities are considerably less pronounced than they were several decades ago.

In 1970, the first year for which data by Latino ethnicity are available, the white poverty rate was in the 13 to 21 percent range, depending on which SPM one uses, while the poverty rate for Black people ranged from 39 to 52 percent, and the poverty rate for Latino people ranged from 34 to 49 percent. Sixty-three years later, in 2023, the poverty rate for white people was just under 10 percent, while the poverty rate for Black people was 19 percent, and the poverty rate for Latino people was a little under 22 percent. The decline in the poverty rate for white people was substantial, but it was outdistanced in both percentage and percentage-point reduction terms by the striking declines in poverty among Black and Latino people. Yet despite this progress, the Black and Latino poverty rates in 2023 remained about double the white rate.¹⁵ (See table 9.)

The story is similar for children. Disparities in child poverty by race and ethnicity were much smaller in 2023 than they had been in 1970, but poverty rates remained considerably higher for children of color than for white children. In 1970, poverty rates for Black and Latino children stood at 42 to 60 percent and exceeded the poverty rate for white children by a remarkable 28 to 38 percentage points. In 2023, the poverty rates for Black and Latino children exceeded the poverty rate for white children by about 12 to 14 percentage points, standing at 21 to 23 percent, as compared to a poverty rate for white children of a little less than 9 percent.

This progress in reducing poverty among Black and Latino people was driven by the strengthening

of social programs as well as by a reduction in their poverty rates before social programs are taken into account. Taxes and transfers raised substantially larger shares of Black and Latino people above the poverty line in 2023 than they did in 1970. In 2023, government benefits and taxes reduced poverty by 11 percentage points for white people, 12 to 13 percentage points for Black people, and 8 percentage points for Latino people. (These figures also reflect, among other things, federal and state restrictions that limit or bar many immigrants, including various categories of immigrants lawfully present in the United States, from receiving various benefits.)

The racial/ethnic patterns with respect to poverty *gaps* are similar to those for poverty rates. Progress in shrinking the poverty gap has been more pronounced for Black and Latino people than for white people. At the same time, the poverty gaps for Black and Latino people in 2023 were nearly double the poverty gap for white people.

Not surprisingly, the deep poverty data also show similar patterns. Deep poverty rates fell more sharply for Black and Latino people than for white people but remained above the rate for white people. In 2023, the deep poverty rate stood at 3.9 percent for white people, about 7 percent for Black people, and a little over 6 percent for Latino people.

Progress on reducing the deep poverty gap appears to have been more muted. The data show modest improvements here for Black and Latino people alongside a lack of progress for white people, but with the deep poverty gap remaining considerably larger for Black and Latino people than for white people. The data also show that the percentage by which taxes and transfers reduce the deep poverty gap was about the same in 2023 as in 1970, staying flat, increasing slightly, or decreasing slightly depending on the racial/ethnic group and the SPM measure used. (These data come with the caveats that other deep poverty data carry, as discussed above.)

TABLE 9

Poverty rates and poverty gaps by race and ethnicity, 1970 and 2023

	Under anchored SPM			Under historical SPM		
	White	Black	Latino	White	Black	Latino
Poverty rate						
1970	20.6%	52.2%	49.0%	13.4%	39.5%	34.6%
2023*	9.8%	19.2%	21.5%	9.6%	19.9%	21.5%
Percentage point difference	-10.8	-33.0	-27.4	-3.8	-19.6	-13.1
Percent change	-53%	-63%	-56%	-28%	-50%	-38%
Poverty Gap Index						
1970	7.5%	20.9%	17.7%	5.2%	14.7%	12.0%
2023*	4.4%	8.4%	8.1%	4.4%	8.4%	8.1%
Percentage point difference	-3.0	-12.5	-9.6	-0.8	-6.3	-3.9
Percent change	-41%	-60%	-54%	-15%	-43%	-32%
Deep poverty rate						
1970	5.5%	16.4%	12.5%	3.9%	11.1%	8.7%
2023*	3.9%	7.0%	6.3%	3.9%	7.2%	6.1%
Percentage point difference	-1.6	-9.4	-6.2	0.0	-3.9	-2.6
Percent change	-30%	-57%	-49%	-0.6%	-35%	-30%
Deep poverty gap index						
1970	2.7%	6.5%	5.3%	2.2%	4.8%	4.0%
2023*	2.6%	4.5%	3.8%	2.6%	4.5%	3.8%
Percentage point difference	-0.1	-2.0	-1.5	0.4	-0.3	-0.2
Percent change	-4%	-31%	-28%	20%	-7%	-4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors' analysis.

Note: 2023 data reflect adjustments for the change in Census' processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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V. Patterns in the poverty data

Looking over these data on changes in poverty rates and poverty gaps since the late 1960s, several broad patterns stand out:

- For the U.S. population as a whole, the overall poverty rate and overall poverty gap have declined substantially since the late 1960s, with most of the progress being due to expansions of social programs.
- But the poverty rate before taxes and transfers declined far less, as the benefits of economic growth grew much less evenly distributed after the early 1970s.
- The progress both on overall poverty rates and on deep poverty rates has exceeded the progress on poverty gaps, including deep poverty gaps, for all of the major population groups we examined.
- In addition, among the U.S. population as a whole, progress in reducing overall poverty has been greater than progress in reducing deep poverty, and under the historical SPM, the deep poverty rate has shown no improvement since 1968.
- Progress in reducing poverty has been greatest among adults over 65, while adults who do not live with children and are below age 65 have fared least well. The latter group's deep poverty rate either increased or declined over the 1967–2023 period, depending on which SPM one uses, and its deep poverty gap appears to have widened under both SPM measures.
- Progress in reducing poverty has been greater among Black and Latino people than among white people, but in 2023, the Black and Latino poverty rates were still roughly double the poverty rate for white people.

VI. Disparate changes in safety net programs over this period and their effects on poverty and deep poverty

Since the late 1960s, a number of major targeted (i.e., means-tested) programs have been created or substantially expanded. The paper now considers some of the changes in the safety net over this period and how those changes may relate to the changes in poverty discussed above.

While major expansions of targeted programs that provide health coverage and reduce the ranks of the uninsured particularly stand out, policymakers also created and/or markedly expanded a number of other programs, including SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), SSI for poor individuals and couples who are elderly or disabled, the EITC, and the CTC. Policymakers established various smaller but still significant programs as well, such as the Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). (For a more extensive discussion of these program expansions, see the 2025 Hamilton Project paper, “Changes in safety-net programs over recent decades and their impact”; Greenstein 2025.)

The effect on poverty has been substantial. Although poverty as measured before government taxes and transfers was at broadly similar levels in 1967 and 2023, poverty after government taxes and transfers are counted fell markedly. Government programs lifted a much larger share of people out of poverty and closed the poverty gap to a considerably greater degree in 2023 than they had in 1967.

The effects are particularly large for people aged 65 or older, a group that has benefited from the growth of Social Security since the late 1960s, the establishment of the SSI program in 1974, and the expansion of SNAP, among other programs (Breslauer and Morton 2021). Under the anchored SPM, the elderly poverty rate plunged from 50.5 percent in 1967 to 14.7 percent in 2023; under the historical SPM, it dropped from 37.6 percent to 14.3 percent. (See table 10.)

In 1967, taxes and transfers reduced the elderly poverty rate by between one-fourth and two-fifths, depending on which SPM one uses. In 2023, taxes and transfers reduced the elderly poverty rate by 70 percent and shrank the elderly poverty gap by 84 percent. Reductions in the elderly poverty rate and elderly poverty gap before taxes and transfers are counted also contributed to these large poverty declines.

Yet while a number of major social programs were being created, expanded, or both over this period, some other significant social programs were cut heavily. The programs that underwent major contraction share a common characteristic: They provide cash assistance to people who are not elderly or disabled and have little or no earnings. These programs include AFDC and its successor, TANF; state General Assistance programs for indigent individuals who are not raising children and are not elderly or classified as disabled; and the Unemployment Insurance program (Greenstein 2025).

The shrinkage in these programs has been large. Zachary Parolin has reported that from 1993 to 2016, expenditures for cash assistance provided to low-income families with children through AFDC and its successor TANF plunged by 78 percent, after adjusting for inflation (Parolin 2021). This retrenchment came on top of sizeable reductions in real AFDC benefit levels in the 1970s and 1980s (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation [ASPE] 1995).

In 1970, AFDC benefits lifted a family of three with no other income above 60 percent of the poverty line in most states, and no state provided benefits amounting to less than 20 percent of the poverty line (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [CBPP] 2022). Today, not a single state provides TANF benefits equal to more than 60 percent of the poverty line, and 17 states provide benefits equal to less than 20 percent (Azevedo-McCaffrey and Aguas 2025; Falk and Landers 2024).

TABLE 10

Poverty among those aged 65 and older, 1967 and 2023

	Anchored SPM	Historical SPM
Elderly poverty rate, 1967	50.5%	37.6%
Elderly poverty rate, 2023*	14.7%	14.3%
Percent change, 1967–2023*	–71%	–62%
Elderly PGI, 1967	21.6%	14.7%
Elderly PGI, 2023*	6.3%	6.2%
Percent change, 1967–2023*	–71%	–58%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors' analysis.

Note: 2023 data reflect adjustments for the change in Census' processing system for the CPS ASEC.



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Moreover, in 1979, for every 100 families with children that had cash income below the poverty line, 82 received cash assistance through AFDC. By 2020, only 21 out of every 100 such families received cash aid through TANF (CBPP 2022). A 2024 Congressional Research Service (CRS) study similarly found that in 1973, some 80 percent of poor children received cash aid through AFDC, but by 2022 only 18 percent of poor children were getting cash assistance through TANF. CRS reported that the number of families with children receiving cash assistance through AFDC or TANF dropped from 5 million in the mid-1990s to 1 million in 2022 (Falk and Landers 2024), a number that declined further to 849,000 families in FY2025 (McWhirter et al. 2026). CRS also reported that a substantial majority of the states now limit a low-income family's receipt of TANF cash assistance to 60 months or fewer over a lifetime (Falk 2025; Falk and Landers 2024).

The story is similar with respect to state General Assistance (GA) programs for very poor adults who are not living with children and are not elderly or disabled. In 1989, some 38 states operated such GA programs. By 2020, only 24 states and the District of Columbia still provided GA benefits to these individuals. In addition, almost all of the states that retained a GA program for such people reduced the benefit levels in real terms, often sharply. By 2020, the maximum GA benefit level was below half of the poverty line in all but two of the states that still operate a program and below a quarter of the poverty line in half of them (Llobrera et al. 2020; Schott 2020; Greenstein 2024).

Nor were the cuts in General Assistance the only cuts imposed on indigent individuals who are not raising children at home and are not elderly or disabled. The 1996 federal welfare law also restricted these individuals' eligibility for SNAP to three months in which they are not employed for at least

20 hours a week out of each three-year period, unless their state or county is able secure a temporary exemption due to elevated unemployment (Llobrera et al. 2021).¹⁶

The Unemployment Insurance program has contracted remarkably as well. In the 1950s, roughly half of unemployed workers received UI benefits in an average month, as did about 40 percent of the unemployed in the 1970s. By contrast, in the decade from 2010 to 2019, only 27 percent of unemployed workers received benefit in an average month (DOL 1979–2019; DOL, n.d.; Wandner and Stettner 2000; Greenstein 2022). Many states have reduced the number of weeks that unemployed workers can receive UI benefits, increased the amount of earnings or work hours required during a base period to qualify for UI benefits, or instituted other restrictive changes (Gwyn 2022; Isaacs 2019).

In short, safety net expansions, particularly for low- and moderate-income working families with children and people 65 and over, have been quite pronounced since the late 1960s, but over the same period, the safety net has strengthened much less or even contracted for many non-elderly-or-disabled households with little or no earnings.

These safety net developments have affected poverty in various ways. We noted above the disappointing results on deep poverty for people aged 18 to 64 who are not living with children, with this group's deep poverty gap appearing to be as large or larger in 2023 than it was in 1967. Also of note are the deep poverty data for this group for the years since the late 1980s, the period during which the major GA cuts and SNAP three-month limit were taking effect even as this group's market income was eroding. Since 1989, the deep poverty rate for this group has increased by more than one-third under the anchored SPM and more than two-thirds

under the historical SPM (see table 7). This group's deep poverty gap has grown wider as well.

The poverty data also appear to reflect some impacts of the 1996 welfare law's reductions in cash welfare assistance on deep poverty among people aged 18 to 64 who are raising children at home. Since 1995, although this group's overall post-tax, post-transfer poverty rate has declined under both SPM measures, its deep poverty gap has increased. This occurred despite the fact that the group's deep poverty gap *before* taxes and transfers declined over this period and the national economy was stronger in 2023 (with a 3.6 percent unemployment rate) than in 1995 (when the unemployment rate stood at 5.6 percent). Taxes and transfers reduced the deep poverty gap for people aged 18 to 64 living with children by 89 to 92 percent in 1995 when using TRIM corrections for the underreporting of SNAP, SSI, and TANF. But that is a level we have not seen again since the mid-1990s, except when government assistance expanded dramatically in response to the COVID pandemic and recession. In 2023, taxes and transfers reduced the deep poverty gap among this group by 82 percent using TRIM corrected figures—still a substantial amount but less than in 1995.

To further investigate the welfare law's impact on deep poverty among those most affected by the law's changes, we can also look at changes in deep poverty among children in single-mother families over the decade that followed the law's enactment, using data corrected for the underreporting of government benefits. (While TRIM corrections for the underreporting of TANF, SNAP, and SSI generally make only a modest difference for overall poverty trends, they are more consequential for trends in child poverty and especially in deep child poverty, because underreported benefits make up a larger share of the incomes of the households with children that have the lowest incomes [Trisi and Saenz 2020].) The first decade under the welfare law is a suitable time-period for such an analysis, because 1995 and 2005 represent comparable points in the business cycle and 2005 predates subsequent policy changes, especially in SNAP, that eased deep child poverty.

Using TRIM corrected figures, under the anchored SPM, the deep poverty rate for children in single-mother families rose from 7.4 percent in 1995 to 8.4 percent in 2005, while these children's deep poverty gap increased by 67 percent. Using the historical SPM, the deep poverty rate for these children climbed from 4.1 percent in 1995 to 6.7 percent in 2005, and their deep poverty gap rose by 109 percent.

The 1996 welfare law's restrictions on the eligibility of various categories of legal immigrants for

safety-net benefits also appear to have had an impact on deep poverty. For people aged 18 to 64 who live in a family that includes children and in which at least one family member lacks citizenship status, government taxes and transfers reduced the deep poverty gap by 86 to 90 percent in 1995¹⁷ but by 63 percent in 2023,¹⁸ using TRIM corrected figures. The 86 to 90 percent reduction has not been seen again since the mid-1990s except for 2021. For people aged 18–64 living with children in a family in which all members are citizens, the decline in how much government taxes and transfers reduced the deep poverty gap has been substantially less. In 1995 taxes and transfers reduced their deep poverty gap by 90 to 92 percent, in 2023 it reduced it by 88 percent, using TRIM corrected figures.

Consistency with other studies

These findings of a bifurcation in how the low-income population has fared—with notable progress on poverty overall, especially for low-income working families with children and people 65 and older, but much less progress or even some retrogression among some of the nation's poorest individuals—are consistent with a number of earlier studies.

James Ziliak found that from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, AFDC and GA benefits closed 20 to 25 percent of the pre-transfer poverty gap for non-elderly families, but by the 1999–2001 period, they filled only 3–6 percent of that gap (Ziliak 2008). Danilo Trisi and Matt Saenz found that in 1995, prior to passage of the 1996 welfare law, AFDC benefits raised 2.8 million children out of deep poverty, but by 2005, TANF benefits were lifting out only 700,000 children. They also found an increase in the deep poverty rate for children in single mother families over this decade (Trisi and Saenz 2020). David Brady and Zachary Parolin found increases in deep poverty between 1995 and 2016 among households without children, with the restrictions that the welfare law's SNAP provisions placed on these individuals playing a role (Brady and Parolin 2020; see also, Bruch et al. 2023; Parolin et al. 2023; Gornick et al. 2024; Greenstein 2024). In an earlier study, Yonatan Ben-Shalom, Robert Moffitt, and John Karl Scholz found that largely because of retrenchment in AFDC and TANF, government taxes and transfers reduced poverty among single-parent families and the unemployed by less in 2004 than they had in 1984, with these effects being strongest on those in deep poverty (Ben-Shalom et al. 2011). And as noted earlier, Wimer, Fox, and their colleagues found essentially no improvement in the overall deep poverty rate since the late 1960s using a historical SPM and

since the early 1970s using an anchored SPM (Fox et al. 2015a, Wimer et al. 2016).

Other studies, as well, have focused on the bifurcation in how various groups in the low-income population have fared under the safety net changes of recent decades, with the safety net growing substantially stronger overall and for various segments of the low-income population but strengthening much less or becoming more spartan for others. Robert Moffitt found a redistribution of government transfers away from the poorest to less-poor households (Moffitt 2015), while Parolin, Matthew Desmond, and Christopher Wimer found that the income gap between the poorest households and other low-income households has widened over recent decades and that by 2019, the average household at the 15th percentile of the pre-tax-and-transfer income scale was receiving more in public benefits than the average household at the 5th percentile (Parolin et al. 2023). Still another study, by Lucie Schmidt, Lara Shore-Sheppard, and

Tara Watson, found that single-parent families with low earnings now receive more in safety net assistance than single-parent families with no earnings (Schmidt et al. 2025).

In addition, Hilary Hoynes and Diane Schanzenbach reported in 2018 that virtually all of the increases in safety net spending for children since 1990—which they defined as spending for children through Medicaid, the EITC, the CTC, SNAP, and AFDC/TANF—went to families with earnings and families above the poverty line. Hoynes and Schanzenbach observed that the United States now “lacks a significant out-of-work social safety net” (Hoynes and Schanzenbach 2018, 126).

These factors help to explain why poverty—and in particular, deep poverty among non-elderly households—have not declined more. Of course, other factors also play a role, including the increase in the share of children living in single-parent rather than married families (Sawhill 2014; Wilcox and Sawhill 2018; Kearney and Sullivan 2025).

VII. Policy implications

These data and findings suggest ways in which policymakers could make further progress in reducing poverty. But the first and most immediate task is to preserve the gains that have been made—and to avert the unraveling of a substantial share of this progress—by reversing damaging cuts in SNAP and Medicaid, as well as rollbacks of health coverage provided through the Affordable Care Act marketplaces, that were enacted as part of the 2025 budget reconciliation legislation. These cuts have already resulted in millions of low-income people losing SNAP assistance, health coverage, or both, even though the cuts have only been partially implemented at this point. If left unchanged, these cuts will, when fully in effect, likely result in millions more people losing food assistance and/or joining the ranks of the uninsured (Rosenbaum et al. 2026; CBPP 2026; CBO 2025c; CBO 2025d).

Simply restoring the status quo as it stood before enactment of the OBBBA, however, should not be sufficient. Policymakers can (and in our view, should) seek to make substantial further progress on poverty beyond where things stood prior to the OBBBA cuts. Doing so will entail action on a number of fronts.

To make progress on poverty in general and deep poverty in particular, policymakers will need to strengthen support for non-elderly, non-disabled households with little or no earnings. Policymakers can pursue this, in part, through such measures as making the CTC fully refundable (as it was for a year in 2021, when it produced very large child poverty reductions) or moving as far in that direction as political constraints allow; by overhauling and strengthening the UI system; and by providing more support to deeply poor people who are not elderly, disabled, or raising children at home.

Reforms such as these will become even more important in coming years and decades if increased use of artificial intelligence (AI) limits or significantly reduces the number of jobs in various sectors of the economy and boosts the number of people with little or no earnings. This scenario underscores the need for a more effective, better functioning UI system, as well as for ensuring that people who lose jobs or have greater difficulty finding them, whether because of AI or for other reasons, have access to health coverage they can afford.

Addressing the shortcomings of the CTC for poor children, especially those in deep poverty, would be particularly important. A recent study finds that children living in deep poverty receive an average of just \$200 a year from the CTC under current law, the equivalent of \$16.67 a month (Yera et al. 2025). Another recent study, from NASEM, finds that fewer than 1 percent of CTC benefits go to children in deep poverty, while almost 89 percent of CTC benefits go to children already above the poverty line (NASEM 2026).¹⁹ Meanwhile, many children in families with six-figure incomes receive \$2,200 for each child.

The story was different in 2021, when the CTC expansion in the American Rescue Plan provided a full, enlarged credit even to the poorest children, and the CTC, along with stimulus payments and other temporary relief measures, spurred the largest one-year decline on record in the child poverty rate, deep poverty rate, poverty gap, and deep poverty gap (Trisi 2023). Those gains for low-income children were reversed when these measures expired after 2021 (Parrott 2023).

Strengthening the rather threadbare safety net for poor, non-elderly adults who are not raising children at home also deserves attention.²⁰ This could be pursued through such measures as bolstering the tiny EITC some in this group can receive, making these individuals eligible for Medicaid in states that until now have declined to serve them, and easing their access to SNAP, as well as broad UI reforms (Gornick et al. 2024; Greenstein 2024).

This population, as well as many other low-income families and individuals, also would benefit from various labor market reforms. The failure of the economic growth of recent decades to provide the type of reduction in market poverty it used to generate demonstrates the need for strong action on the employment and wage fronts, alongside safety net improvements. Bolstering the incomes of the lowest-paid workers in many states through a long-overdue increase in the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour is one necessary step (Gornick et al. 2024). Expansions of apprenticeships and job training programs that have proven effective, and public-service employment programs that offer transitional jobs where needed, also would be beneficial

(Werner and Giannarelli 2023; Wimer et al. 2020; Danziger 2007). So would providing paid parental leave (Booth 2026) and increasing the availability of child care that is affordable to families with low or modest incomes, which should increase employment and earnings (Burgess et al. 2016; Morrissey 2017; NASEM 2024; Pepin 2020; Schneider 2025; Haskins 2026; Baker et al. 2026). Measures to address barriers to labor organizing, especially among low-paid workers, also are overdue (Gornick et al. 2024).

Easing pressure on rental and other housing costs by substantially increasing the supply of affordable housing, while also boosting the share of low-income renters who receive rental assistance, should be another integral element of a reinvigorated poverty-reduction agenda. A recent study by Zachary Parolin of poverty conditions in California finds that increases in rental charges in that state

have cancelled out virtually all of the anti-poverty effect of the SNAP expansions of recent decades. Parolin advises that “increases in housing supply offer redistributive benefits comparable to major income support programs and should be understood as an important anti-poverty tool” (Parolin 2025). In addition, analysis by Harvard’s Joint Center of Housing Studies shows that more than three of every four renters nationwide with incomes below \$30,000 were “cost-burdened” in 2024, meaning housing costs consumed more than 30 percent of their limited incomes, the longstanding HUD standard for housing affordability (Whitney 2024).

To be sure, such changes would not be inexpensive. Given the nation’s troubling fiscal outlook, they will require both raising more tax revenue and making hard choices—and engaging in tough priority setting—throughout the federal budget (Duke 2026).²¹

Appendix: Issues in poverty measurement

This appendix has two sections. The first section discusses in more detail whether to use the anchored SPM or the historical SPM to measure changes in poverty over time. The second section discusses why the Poverty Gap Index (PGI) is more appropriate for measuring changes in poverty gaps over time than a per-capita poverty-gap measure.

I. Which SPM to use in tracking changes in poverty over time

As noted in the body of this paper, one issue is whether it is better to use the “standard/historical” SPM or the “anchored” SPM to track changes in poverty levels over time. For our purposes, we prefer a poverty measure that uses poverty-line thresholds that are adjusted for increases in the cost of living for low-income households and hold living standards constant.

The shortcomings of using the anchored SPM for this purpose

For several reasons, the anchored SPM falls somewhat short in this regard. First, Labor Department data show that the anchored-SPM thresholds have not fully kept pace with increases over time in low-income households’ cost of living (Klick and Stockburger 2024). The DOL data show that from 2005 to 2023, CPI inflation for the bottom quintile of the population equaled 59.8 percent²², modestly higher than the 56.9 percent rate of inflation for the same period shown in the Consumer Price Index measure used to adjust the anchored SPM’s poverty-line thresholds for inflation (the CPI-U-RS, which is the retroactive CPI in the Labor Department’s research series).

This discrepancy appears to have occurred for several reasons. Housing costs have risen faster than the overall CPI-U-RS, especially for low-income households, and housing costs constitute a larger share of poor households’ budgets than of the budgets of people higher on the income scale (Whitney 2024).

The CPI also understates inflation for low-income households when the cost of necessities rises faster than the cost of luxuries. An aggregate price index like the CPI blends the costs of everything in the economy. Over the past few decades, the prices of easily outsourced, globally tradeable goods like flat-screen televisions have plummeted, often as a result of rapid technological advances, while the costs of non-tradeable necessities like rent have risen markedly. For these and other reasons, several studies have found that living costs have risen faster for low-income households than for households higher on the income scale and that the CPI consequently understates the cost increases that low-income households have faced (Jaravel 2021; Wimer et al. 2019).

A related issue regarding the anchored SPM is that its thresholds are adjusted by a CPI series, and the CPI itself appears to somewhat understate increases in rental costs. Some research suggests that particularly during periods such as the years before 1978 and in recent years, the CPI may have materially understated increases in rents (Gordon and van Goethem 2007; Lyons et al. 2024; Crone et al. 2010).

One factor here appears to be that there have been major improvements over time in low-income households’ housing quality, but part of that improvement reflects government regulations and ordinances that require certain housing upgrades, with the result that some low-income households have little alternative but to spend more for housing than they otherwise would (Quigley and Raphael 2004). The CPI measure that is used to adjust the anchored SPM’s poverty thresholds over time, however, subtracts the costs of housing-quality improvements; it measures changes in same-quality housing, which understates the increase in housing costs that low-income households face when the supply of low-cost, low-quality housing declines, as it has in recent decades. This further causes the anchored SPM (whose thresholds, as noted, are adjusted by a CPI series) to overstate progress on poverty over time. By contrast, the historical SPM thresholds are based on households’ actual spending on necessities and thus can more fully capture increases over time in the cost of a necessity such as rent.

Furthermore, expenditure patterns can shift over time due to societal changes, such as the increase in dual-earner households. In the 1960s, a family could meet its basic nutritional needs more inexpensively through time-intensive food preparation at home by a stay-at-home spouse. Today, due to time constraints, dual-earner families rely more on partially prepared meals and meals purchased away from home, which are more expensive per equivalent meal. This shift would not show up as a price increase in the CPI and thus would not be captured by anchored SPM thresholds adjusted by the CPI-U-RS. This increase would be captured by the historical SPM thresholds, which, as noted, are based on actual spending for necessities.

Another issue is that the anchored SPM series does not capture, as part of its measurement of poverty changes over time, new costs that can arise when an item goes from not existing to becoming a necessity in modern society. Several decades ago, home internet services did not exist, and families thus did not need them. Today, families need access to the internet to apply for jobs, access various forms of medical care, and the like. The Census Bureau responded to this in 2021 by adding internet services to the core basket of necessities used to adjust the SPM thresholds each year. (This is one of the reasons the poverty thresholds for the anchored SPM series we use are anchored to the SPM thresholds for 2023, rather than the thresholds for 1967. If we examined poverty in 2023 using thresholds anchored to 1967, the thresholds would be too low for necessities in 2023, in part because internet services were not a necessity in 1967 but are in 2023.)

The shortcomings of using the historical SPM to track changes in poverty over time

Using the historical SPM to track changes in poverty over time, however, has significant shortcomings of its own. First, the historical SPM is a quasi-relative measure of poverty (Wimer et al. 2016; Creamer 2024). When using it to assess changes in poverty rates or the poverty gap over time, it is difficult to disentangle changes in low-income households' living costs from changes that have occurred in living standards.

Housing is an example here, as well, although in the opposite direction. As noted, housing costs have risen quite substantially over recent decades. Those increases are reflected in the increases in the historical SPM's poverty-line thresholds. But part of the increase in housing costs that has pushed the historical SPM's poverty-line thresholds upward reflects substantial improvements in low-income households' housing quality. A recent

Aspen Economic Strategy Group paper by Melissa Kearney and James Sullivan (Kearney and Sullivan 2025) tracks changes for the bottom 20 percent of the population over the 1980–2021 period in seven housing-quality indicators, including unit size, whether the unit has central air conditioning, whether it has a dishwasher, whether it has a clothes dryer, and whether it has a water leak. Kearney and Sullivan find that all seven housing-condition indicators improved for low-income households over the 1980–2021 period and that for nearly all of the indicators, the improvement was greater for the bottom 20 percent of the population than for middle-class households. For example, the share of low-income households with central air conditioning more than quadrupled over this period. There were also substantial increases among low-income households in having appliances such as dishwashers and clothes dryers, as well as sharp decreases in conditions such as water leaks. Kearney and Sullivan report that for most of these housing-quality indicators, conditions for the bottom quintile in 2021 were as good or better than those for middle-class households in 1980. Thus, the increases over time in the historical SPM's poverty-line thresholds, which are based on household consumption expenditures, reflect not only increases in the cost of living but also improvements in living standards such as these.

To be sure, some housing-quality improvements can result in housing-cost increases that many low-income households can have difficulty affording. That can occur, for example, when most or all of the available rental housing in an area features such improvements. Quigley and Raphael found that government regulations, ordinances, and the like that were designed to improve housing quality and make housing safer also had the effect of raising housing costs and essentially compelling some low-income households to pay more for housing than they would want to do (Quigley and Raphael 2004). In such cases, various quality improvements may not be a matter of choice for low-income households, and it thus may be appropriate for poverty thresholds to reflect the increases in costs resulting from them.²³

The increases over time in the poverty thresholds the historical SPM uses may overstate increases in low-income households' living costs for a number of other reasons as well. The SPM thresholds for years before 2020 are based on expenditures for food, clothing, shelter and utilities—plus 20 percent to cover other expenditures—for people in the 30th to the 36th percentiles of expenditures for food, clothing, shelter, and utilities. (For years starting in 2019, the SPM thresholds are based on 82 percent of spending for these items, as well as for core internet services, plus 20 percent for people in the 47th to 53rd percentiles of expenditures on these items.)

This raises several issues. First, because housing costs have risen considerably faster over recent decades than the costs of other items, the use of the 20-percent multiplier to estimate changes in the costs of items household purchase *other than* food, clothing, shelter, and utilities produces historical SPM thresholds that assume the costs of the other items have been rising at a somewhat faster pace than they may actually have increased (Klick and Stockburger 2024; Trisi and Sherman 2024). Prices for the items specific to the SPM thresholds (food, clothing, shelter, and utilities) have been rising more rapidly in recent years than prices for a larger basket of goods on which low-income households spend their money (Wimer et al. 2024).²⁴

Another issue is that the historical SPM thresholds for years before 2020 are based on consumption by households in the 30th to the 36th percentiles (BLS 2025; Wimer et al. 2016; Wimer et al. 2024). The creation and subsequent expansion over the past half-century-plus of the EITC and the CTC, as well as some of the SNAP expansions (including SNAP's expansion in most states to certain elderly and low-income-working households with incomes up to twice the poverty line) have had the effect of artificially pushing the SPM thresholds upward, because these benefit expansions have led to increased consumption by households in this income range. (These households clearly do not simply save the benefit increases.)²⁵

The amount of new or increased benefits that some of these program expansions have provided to millions of lower-middle and middle-income families in the relevant income-percentile ranges—particularly the expansions in the EITC and the CTC—is very substantial. These benefit increases thus have had the problematic effect, from a poverty-measurement standpoint, of pushing the SPM thresholds upward and thereby making it appear that poverty under the historical SPM has declined by less than is actually the case.

Also of note is that in 2020, when the BLS moved from basing the SPM thresholds on consumption by people in the 30th to 36th percentiles of the income distribution to basing the thresholds (for years starting in 2019) on 82 percent of consumption by households in the 47th to 53rd percentiles, BLS made some other methodological changes as well. As noted, it added home internet service to the core basket of necessities (arguably an important and necessary addition). It also made certain other methodological revisions (BLS 2025). Together, these changes have resulted in slightly higher SPM thresholds (about 0.4 percent higher) and thus in slightly higher poverty rates under the revised methodology.²⁶

Finally, a notable statistic is that between 2005, when BLS' SPM thresholds start, and 2023, a weighted average of the historical SPM thresholds (weighting renters and homeowners with and without mortgages by their relative shares of the U.S. population) increased by 78.7 percent. Over these same years, as Klick and Stockburger (2024) show, a CPI specifically constructed for the lowest (size-adjusted) quintile of the U.S. population rose by 59.8 percent. The R-CPI-U-RS that we use to create the anchored SPM threshold series rose by 56.9 percent, closer to though slightly lower than the increase in the bottom-quintile CPI as calculated by Klick and Stockburger (2024).

The value of using both SPMs

These findings support our approach of regarding the two SPMs as providing upper and lower bounds for changes in SPM poverty over periods of time. Relying only on the anchored SPM's poverty thresholds to measure low-income families' needs can miss meaningful shifts over time in what those families must spend to meet basic needs. Relying only on the historical SPM can result in poverty thresholds that rise faster than what these families must spend to meet these needs.

Some data suggest that between the two SPMs, the anchored SPM may track changes in the cost of living for the low-income population more closely than the historical SPM thresholds do. A recent example comes from data for the 2019–2023 period. Over those years, the poverty rate after taxes and transfers *increased* by 1.1 percentage points under the historical SPM (from 11.6 percent to 12.8 percent), while *declining* by 0.6 percentage points under the anchored SPM (from 13.4 percent to 12.8 percent). A Congressional Budget Office analysis of how inflation affected households at different income levels over this period reported that between 2019 and 2023, the share of income after taxes and transfers that households in the bottom quintile needed to purchase their 2019 consumption bundle decreased by 2 percent (CBO 2024), a finding more consistent with the poverty-rate change measured by the anchored SPM than the change measured by the historical SPM. Also of note, various researchers, including Christopher Wimer and colleagues (Wimer et al. 2016), analysts at the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA 2014), and analysts at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Chaudry et al. 2016), have observed that the anchored SPM has advantages over the historical SPM if the goal is to track changes over time in the impact that government tax-and-transfer programs have on poverty.

Problems with using the PCE price index to adjust poverty thresholds over time

Some analysts who prefer the anchored SPM approach to the historical SPM argue for using the PCE price index instead of the R-CPI-U-RS to adjust poverty thresholds over time. We disagree with this approach because data suggest that the PCE significantly understates the level of inflation that low-income households experience; calculations by BLS economists (Klick and Stockburger 2024) demonstrate that the PCE has performed less well than the R-CPI-U-RS in tracking inflation for the bottom quintile. Between 2005 and 2023, the PCE increased by 46.7 percent, while the R-CPI-U-RS rose by 56.9 percent, much closer to the 59.8 percent increase in the bottom-quintile CPI.

Proponents of the PCE favor it in part because they regard it as better handling what they see as biases in the CPI and because, unlike the traditional CPI-U, it accounts for households' tendency to make substitutions in their purchases when the costs of some goods rise while the costs of similar goods rise less (Burkhauser et al. 2019; Burkhauser and Corinth 2026). Klick and Stockburger (2024) examined this latter issue, however, by calculating a chained CPI specifically for the bottom quintile (the R-C-CPI-I) for the years 2005 to 2022. They found that even after accounting for substitution, the overall R-CPI-U-RS provides a better proxy for changes in low-income households' cost of living than the overall PCE does. Over that period, the R-CPI-U-RS increased by 50.7 percent, exactly matching the increase in the bottom-quintile chained CPI, while the PCE lagged significantly behind at 41.4 percent. A key reason the PCE has shown lower inflation rates over the past two decades is that it deemphasizes shelter costs relative to what the CPI does. Shelter costs carry about twice the weight in the CPI (roughly one-third of the index) that they do in the PCE (where they account for roughly one-sixth of the index). Given that housing costs constitute such a large share of lower-income households' budgets, this is another reason the PCE appears to be less appropriate for adjusting poverty thresholds over time.

II. Why the PGI is better suited than a per-capita poverty gap measure for tracking changes in the poverty gap over time

In assessing the depth of poverty in a given year, the per-capita poverty gap and the total-dollar poverty gap provide useful information that non-technical

audiences can more easily grasp and understand than the data provided by the PGI, which by its nature is quite technical.²⁷ But the PGI is better suited to measure changes in the poverty gap over time for several reasons. The PGI standardizes the poverty gap by dividing a family's poverty gap by that family's poverty threshold. Doing so accounts for the economies of scale that are inherent in the creation of poverty thresholds. Economies of scale reflect the economic principle that the per-person cost of living decreases as more people live together.

An accurate accounting of economies of scale is of particular importance when measuring changes in the poverty gap over time because family sizes have been shrinking in recent decades. The per-capita poverty gap for any year is calculated by dividing family poverty gaps in that year by the number of persons per family in that year, a figure that is not adjusted to reflect economies of scale. When family sizes are shrinking over time, however, using a poverty gap measure that does not account for the changes in economies of scale resulting from the reductions in family size will make it seem like the poverty gap is increasing over time even if family well-being, as measured by families' income-to-poverty-line ratios, has remained constant.

Consider the following example. Let's imagine a family of four with \$20,000 in income and a four-person-family poverty line of \$40,000. The family's aggregate poverty gap would be \$20,000, its PGI would be 50 percent, and its per-capita poverty gap would be \$5,000. The following year, the family splits into two two-person families. Let's imagine that the poverty line for a two-person family (assuming economies of scale, as poverty thresholds do) is \$28,000 and that each of these two families now makes \$14,000. Their aggregate poverty gap would be \$28,000 (\$14,000 for each family). Their PGI would still be 50 percent, but now their per-person poverty gap would be \$7,000 (\$28,000 divided by four people) instead of \$5,000. The per-capita poverty gap measure would thus portray their poverty gap as having increased markedly even though the families' income-to-poverty-line ratios have remained constant (and these individuals' overall earnings have increased).

Another advantage of using a PGI measure rather than a per-capita poverty gap measure to measure changes in poverty gaps over time is that by standardizing the aggregate poverty gap by dividing it by that year's poverty thresholds, one does not have to worry about what is the appropriate inflator to use to adjust the per-capita poverty gap levels for different years. This avoids the problem that if the poverty-line thresholds are constructed in such a way that they rise either faster than inflation (as the historical SPM thresholds do) or more slowly

than inflation for low-income households (as the anchored SPM thresholds do), but the per-capita poverty gap levels for different years are adjusted for CPI inflation, the trend results that are produced can be substantially skewed.

As we explained earlier, a PGI of 10 percent means that lifting everyone out of poverty would require a perfectly targeted financial transfer equal to 10 percent of each person's respective poverty line. Because a unit's PGI is calculated directly in the microdata by dividing its nominal poverty gap by its specific SPM threshold, the index inherently standardizes the depth of poverty against the economies of scale built into that threshold. This makes the PGI uniquely suited for tracking poverty trends over time. It provides a measure of poverty depth that is comparable across years, is automatically insulated from demographic shifts in average SPM unit size, and is protected from inconsistencies between how SPM thresholds are updated and how nominal dollars are adjusted for inflation.

Methodological explanation of poverty analysis

Data sources. The analyses in this report were conducted using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), as well as historical SPM data produced by the Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy.²⁸ We use the Census Bureau's SPM data when available starting in 2009 and the Columbia SPM data for prior years. We created an anchored SPM series using 2023 thresholds adjusted for inflation using the Labor Department's retroactive CPI research series (R-CPI-U-RS). Our analyses use the corrected Supplemental Poverty Measure thresholds that the BLS released on July 17, 2026 (U.S. Census Bureau 2026).

Corrections for underreporting. Survey-based counts of participants in various social programs typically fall well short of the totals shown in actual administrative records. Such underreporting is common in household surveys and can affect estimates of poverty (Meyer and Mittag 2019). The extent of underreporting can vary by program and by year. Data from the Urban Institute's Transfer Income Model, or TRIM3, can help address this problem; the TRIM data adjust the CPS ASEC data by using government administrative data on the amounts of program benefits disbursed to households (Meyer et al. 2019).

The TRIM data are available, however, only for years starting in 1993. As a result, we cannot use TRIM data when comparing poverty data for 1967 or other years before 1993 to poverty data for recent

years. We do use TRIM3 baseline data to adjust some of our recent-period analyses to account for the underreporting of three basic cash or near-cash programs: AFDC/TANF, SSI, and SNAP.

Also of note, in July 2025, the Census Bureau issued the third release of data from its National Experimental Well-Being Statistics (NEWS) project, with these data covering the years from 2016 through 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau 2025). By linking survey responses with administrative records and other data sources, the NEWS data aim to address underreporting, as well as non-response to surveys, missing information, and other sources of measurement error. We did not utilize these data in our analysis because they are not available for years prior to 2016 or after 2021 and are not available in a public use microdata format.

Accounting for the updated processing system that Census implemented in 2019. In 2019, the Census Bureau released CPS ASEC data based on an updated processing system (Fox 2019). To facilitate comparisons across time, Census released two versions of the 2017 data: one version that used the updated processing system and hence is comparable to Census data for 2018 and subsequent years, and another version that used the older (or "legacy") processing system rather than the updated system and thus is comparable to the Census data for years before 2017. We use the difference between these two versions of the 2017 data to estimate the impact of the methodological change, applying this difference to the data for subsequent years so that we can bridge the time series. For example, the historical SPM poverty rate in 2017 was 13.9 percent under the legacy processing system and 13.0 percent under the updated processing system, representing a difference of 0.9 percentage points. In 2023, the reported SPM poverty rate was 12.8 percent. By adding the 0.9 percentage-point adjustment to the 2023 rate, we estimate an adjusted 2023 SPM poverty rate of 13.7 percent, which accounts for the 2017 methodological change and which we use in comparing the 2023 poverty-rate data to poverty rates for years before 2017. In addition, to account for the fact that the processing system redesign did not impact all populations uniformly, we calculate and apply such an adjustment separately for each specific poverty measure and population subgroup. By calculating distinct 2017 adjustments for the specific subgroups that we examine—such as children, adults over 65, and different racial groups—as well as for different measures like the deep poverty rate and the poverty gap index, we maintain longitudinal consistency across different subgroups and measures.

TRIM corrections for the underreporting of SNAP, SSI, and TANF, however, are only available

for the 2017 CPS ASEC file utilizing the legacy processing system. Consequently, to bridge post-2017 TRIM-corrected data, we applied the same subgroup- and measure-specific additive adjustments described above that we derived from the non-TRIM data. We concluded that this approach was appropriate because the aggregate differences between the results from the two 2017 processing systems are not affected much by the measurement of SNAP, SSI, and TANF benefits. Specifically, the SPM poverty rate in 2017, when excluding these benefits from SPM resources, was 15.9 percent under the legacy system and 15.1 percent under the updated system. This difference of 0.86 percentage points is nearly identical to the 0.90 percentage-point difference observed when those benefits are included in resources.

Defining government assistance. Our calculations of the effect of government assistance and taxes include: Social Security, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, veterans' benefits, TANF, state GA, SSI, SNAP, the National School Lunch

Program, WIC, rental assistance (such as Section 8 and public housing), home energy assistance, the EITC, and the CTC. Benefit figures for 2008–10 also reflect a number of temporary federal benefits enacted in response to the Great Recession: the 2008 stimulus payment, 2009 economic recovery payment, and 2009–10 Making Work Pay Tax Credit. Similarly, benefit figures for 2020–21 include economic impact payments, and figures for 2021 and later years include broadband assistance. Taxes, subtracted from family resources, are family members' federal and state income and payroll taxes.

Race and ethnicity definitions. In this report, the term "Latino" refers to individuals of any race who identify as Hispanic or Latino in U.S. Census Bureau surveys. All racial and ethnic categories constructed for this analysis are mutually exclusive. Specifically, the term white refers exclusively to individuals identifying as "white only, not Latino," and Black refers exclusively to individuals identifying as "Black only, not Latino."

Endnotes

1. The Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion increased public health insurance for this population, but that affects poverty rates under the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which we use in this paper, only to the extent that it changes people's out-of-pocket health spending. The U.S. Census Bureau has recently started publishing each year an alternative poverty measure, called the Health Inclusive Poverty Measure (HIPM), that shows that when health care is included as a basic need in setting the poverty thresholds and health insurance is counted as a family resource, Medicaid and Medicare keep millions of people from falling below the poverty line (Creamer 2025).
2. The national unemployment rate was 3.8 percent in 1967 and 3.6 percent in 2023. In addition, 2023 is the latest year for which TRIM-adjusted poverty data currently are publicly available.
3. Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy, "Historical Poverty Trends and Measurement," <https://povertycenter.columbia.edu/historical-poverty-trends-and-measurement>. We use SPM data from the Columbia Center for Poverty and Social Welfare Policy for years before 2009 and Census Bureau data for years since.
4. The PGI is one of what are known as the Foster-Greer-Thorbecke class of poverty measures (Foster et al. 2010).
5. In cases when SPM units have negative total resources, we bottom-code those units to zero when calculating the PGI. This aligns with standard conventions in poverty gap analyses, ensuring that a unit's maximum poverty gap does not exceed its poverty threshold.
6. We follow the terminology used by Wimer et al. (2024) in calling the SPM that uses poverty-line thresholds which change over time with changes in expenditure levels the historical SPM. When the Columbia research team constructed the historical SPM, they attempted to mimic Census and BLS SPM measurement decisions with as much fidelity as possible going back in time and given available data constraints. Because the thresholds in this series float with contemporary changes in expenditure levels—identical to the SPM published by the Census Bureau starting with 2009—this unanchored series, which we refer to as the historical SPM, is also often referred to as the standard SPM. Under both SPMs, a unit's poverty threshold is based on its housing tenure, geographic location, and unit composition.
7. This means that the poverty-line thresholds for years before 2023 equal the 2023 thresholds adjusted for inflation using the retroactive CPI research series (R-CPI-U-RS) produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That BLS series goes back to 1978. To make inflation adjustments for years before 1978, we use the R-CPI-U-RS produced by the Census Bureau (also known as the CPI-U-X1). These are the same inflation series that the Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy uses to produce its anchored SPM thresholds.
8. A related factor is that the methodology that the CPI-U-RS employs to measure housing-cost changes over time results in some further understatement of the housing-cost increases that low-income households have faced. Over recent decades, there have been considerable improvements in housing quality, especially for low-income households (Kearney and Sullivan 2025). Some of these improvements, however, reflect state or local regulations or ordinances that, while aimed at such goals as making housing safer and less crowded, have also contributed to the contraction of the low-income housing supply and thereby raised what many low-income households must spend on housing to levels above what they otherwise would choose to spend (Quigley and Raphael 2004). But the CPI-U-RS is a "constant-quality" price index; if a landlord upgrades a unit or adds amenities, the CPI-U-RS will subtract the estimated value of the improvement from the unit's cost so that only the price change net of the upgrade registers as inflation. In other words, the CPI-U-RS captures only rent changes within units of the same quality even when the stock of lower-cost, lower-quality units contracts, as it has in recent decades.
9. TRIM3 (trim3.urban.org) is maintained and developed by the Urban Institute, under primary funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (HHS/ASPE).
10. Where we make TRIM adjustments, we use TRIM3 baseline data to correct for the underreporting of benefits provided through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). One caution is that TRIM3 adjustments have some weaknesses of their own. Analysts have found that TRIM3 adjustments attribute too large a share of the underreported benefit income to people otherwise below the poverty line and too small a share to people already above the line (Bee et al. 2023; Mittag 2019; Shantz and Fox 2018; Stevens et al. 2018). Of particular concern, TRIM 3's over-adjustments appear to be largest for the people who are poorest. Mittag found that "TRIM sharply overcorrects below the poverty line, making it particularly problematic for studies of extreme poverty" (Mittag 2019, 161). For deep poverty data in particular, unadjusted Census data appear to markedly overstate poverty (NASEM 2026), while TRIM3 data appear to understate it.
11. The TRIM data used here and elsewhere in this paper adjust for the underreporting of AFDC/TANF, SNAP, and SSI, the same programs that NASEM makes TRIM adjustments for in the parts of its 2019 child poverty study where it considers poverty trends for years for which TRIM data are available. While the Urban Institute's public TRIM website also provides data on the underreporting of housing subsidies, we do not include them here, as our testing indicates those data yield negligible differences in poverty trends, compared to the housing variables already provided in the Census files and reflected in the data that we use. We also do not apply TRIM adjustments for Unemployment Insurance, due to the lack

of publicly available TRIM data with UI adjustments over this period. We similarly do not include TRIM adjustments for LI-HEAP and WIC, as they are both available on the TRIM website only for 2012 and 2015, rendering them unsuitable for our time series.

12. Expenditures for refundable tax credits shown here represent outlays, as defined by the Office of Management and Budget and the Congressional Budget Office. They include the refundable components of these tax credits but not the non-refundable components, which reduce income taxes otherwise owed.
13. Median family income data do not include single-person households, while median household income data do. The fact that real median household income rose much less than real median family income over this period is in part an artifact of a demographic shift in which single-person households, which tend to have lower incomes, have come to comprise a larger share of households than they did several decades ago (Goodman-Bacon and Liu 2026).
14. When we compare TRIM-adjusted and non-adjusted deep poverty data for 1993 and 2017 using the anchored SPM, we find the deep poverty rate declined by 19 percent under the unadjusted data and 20 percent under the adjusted data, while the deep poverty PGI edged down by 2 percent under the non-adjusted data and 3 percent under the adjusted data.
15. The 2023 figures cited here have been adjusted for the changes made in 2017 in the Census processing system to make them more appropriate to compare to the 1970 figures.
16. The 1996 welfare law, which first established the three-months-out-of-three-years SNAP limit for such individuals, applied the limit to people between the ages of 18 and 49 who are not raising children at home. Legislation enacted in 2023 expanded the age range of individuals subject to this time limit to those aged 18–54, while the major budget reconciliation measure enacted in July 2025, known as OBBBA, expands the age range further so it now applies to those aged 18–64. OBBBA also restricts temporary waivers of this limit that are based on elevated unemployment to counties that have an unemployment rate of 10 percent or higher, a level most counties do not reach even during major national recessions (Bauer and Patt 2025).
17. In 1995, taxes and transfers reduced the deep poverty gap for these people by 86 percent under the anchored SPM and 90 percent under the historical SPM.
18. In 2023, taxes and transfers reduced the deep poverty gap for these people by 63 percent under both the anchored SPM and the historical SPM.
19. These estimates from the NASEM study classify families with children by poverty status based on their incomes before CTC and EITC benefits are considered. Under those estimates, the 2.7 percent of children in deep poverty receive 0.8 percent of CTC benefits, and the 18.1 percent of children below the poverty line receive 10.6 percent of CTC benefits. These figures do not reflect the CTC changes made by the OBBBA, which should result in the share of CTC benefits going to children in poverty and deep poverty becoming even lower, by a small amount.
20. Bruce Meyer recently commented at a W. K. Kellogg event that “the safety net fails single people,” a group that “is not reached by the safety net and includes many with extremely low incomes” (Meyer, n.d.).
21. For example, every effort should be made to restore long-term Social Security and Medicare Part A solvency through changes in those programs, on both the tax and the spending sides, rather than by using general-revenue transfers for that purpose and thereby placing even greater strain on the rest of the budget and further limiting the resources available for other priorities.
22. Table C-1 in Klick and Stockburger (2024) reports the average 12-month percent change for each year. Because the 2006 rate measures price growth relative to 2005, the year 2005 serves as the starting baseline. Compounding these year-over-year annual changes sequentially from 2006 through 2023 yields a cumulative 59.8 percent price increase for the bottom quintile over the 2005–23 period.
23. That some housing-quality improvements may not be a matter of choice for some low-income households is, as noted, another reason that the anchored SPM thresholds may understate increases in low-income households’ living costs over time. In computing the CPI, the Bureau of Labor Statistics measures price increases; in so doing, BLS does not count rental increases that are associated with certain housing-quality improvements. This thus is an area in which both SPMs have limitations.
24. The price index measuring household expenditures for necessities that BLS uses in setting each year’s SPM thresholds (the FCSUti) increased by 62.5 percent between 2005 (the first year for which BLS has issued SPM thresholds) and 2023, as compared to an increase of 59.8 percent over this period in the CPI for the bottom quintile of the population as calculated by Klick and Stockburger (2024). In addition, as discussed later in this appendix, a weighted average of the actual historical SPM thresholds increased by 78.7 percent between 2005 and 2023, well above the increase in the bottom-quintile CPI. The 78.7 percent increase in the historical SPM thresholds reflects increases in the FCSUti and in households’ expenditures for necessity items, as well as changes in the historical SPM methodology, which are discussed later in this paper. For more details on the FCSUti, see <https://www.bls.gov/pir/spmhome.htm>.
25. See also Wimer et al. (2016), which notes that including expenditures derived from SNAP benefits in setting the SPM thresholds makes it more difficult to secure “a fully complete accounting of the total effect of government policies and programs in reducing the poverty rate” (Wimer et al. 2016, 1209).
26. For 2019, BLS calculated SPM thresholds under both the old and new methodologies (available for download at <https://www.bls.gov/pir/spmhome.htm>). Comparing a weighted average of both versions shows that the 2019 thresholds were 0.4 percent higher (about \$112 for a reference family of four) under the updated methodology.
27. The dollar figures calculated in a poverty gap analysis offer significant practical utility: At the unit level, they demonstrate the exact additional income required to reach the poverty threshold. At the aggregate level, they estimate the total cost of perfectly targeted government transfers needed to lift all individuals to the poverty line.
28. The Current Population Survey data we access via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. The historical Supplemental Poverty Measure data come from the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University, <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/historical-spm-data-reg> <https://povertycenter.columbia.edu/historical-spm-data>.

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This paper explores changes in U.S. poverty since the late 1960s and the role that changes in safety net programs played in these developments. We examine changes in the poverty rate, poverty gap, deep poverty rate, and deep poverty gap from 1967 to 2023, using both the “historical/standard” and “anchored” Supplemental Poverty Measures.

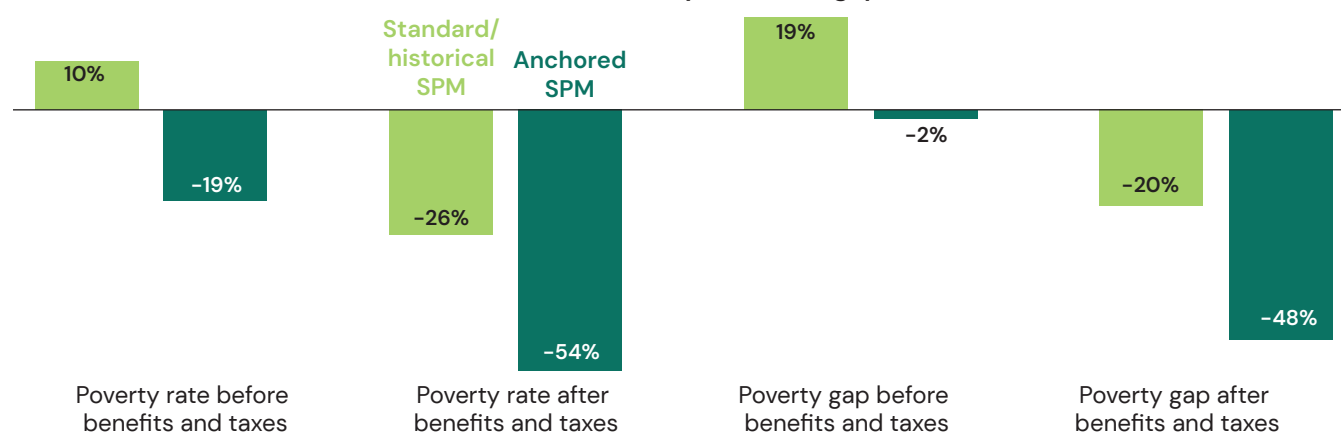
The paper finds that the poverty rate and poverty gap declined markedly over this period, with the poverty gap declining somewhat less than the poverty rate. The paper finds considerably less progress, however, in reducing deep poverty and especially the deep poverty gap, which shows little improvement over this period. The paper also finds that these poverty changes have not been evenly distributed, with the most concerning results being for people aged 18–64 who have little or no earnings and do not live with children.

The paper finds that these trends reflect both the overall strengthening of the safety net over this period, especially for the elderly and low-income working families with children, and the weakening of parts of the safety net—especially cash assistance programs—for many very poor people who have little or no earnings and are not elderly or classified as disabled. The findings also reflect the failure of the economic growth that occurred over this period to generate much poverty reduction.

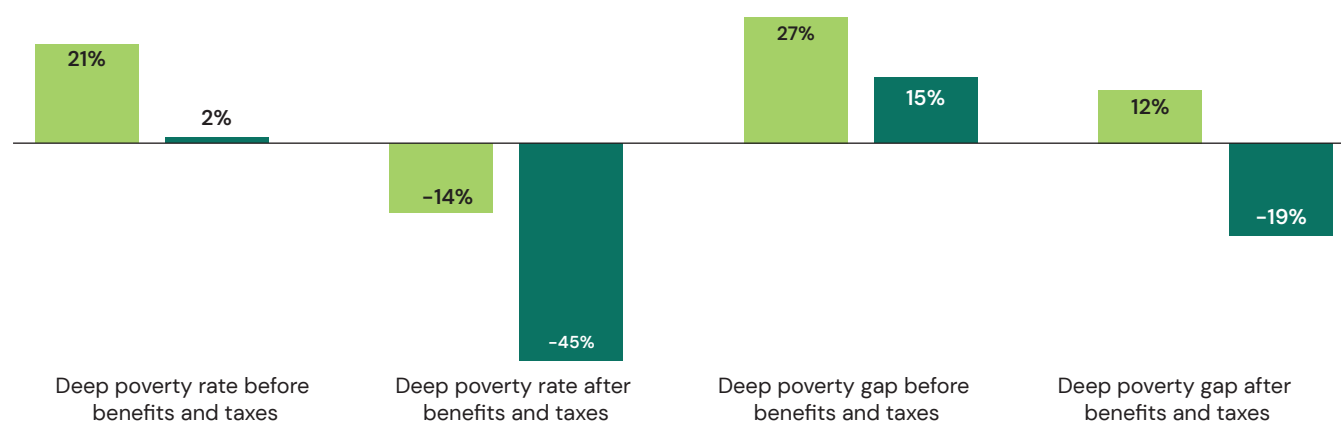
Because our analysis ends in 2023, it does not reflect the deep cuts to safety net programs enacted in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) of 2025. When fully in effect, those cuts almost certainly will increase poverty and deep poverty rates and gaps and will thus reverse some of the gains reported here.

Percent change in SPM poverty, deep poverty rates, and gaps, 1967–2023

A. Poverty rates and gaps



B. Deep poverty rates and gaps



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy 2024; authors' analysis.

Note: Calculations use 2023 data that are adjusted for the change Census made in 2017 in its processing system for the CPS ASEC.

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